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Learning to live by light

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Learning to live by light

by

Christopher James

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
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To all who supported me
and had faith in me before I did.
Thank you.

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SECTION ONE

"Are we our wet black roots
Or do we live by light?
One hand grips, the other makes a sign."

Gary Snyder

Spring Visit to Dachau

I am on the S-Bahn to Dachau. The train out of Munich is new, sporting bright navy vinyl seats. I sit alone trying to read a Simenon mystery in French, my traveling companions having left for the U.S. weeks ago. Across from me two German businessmen argue some point incoherently over dark briefcases. I understand nothing. Although I continue with my book, the train arrives at Dachau before I can finish another chapter. As I walk out of the station and notice the blue-lettered sign, I realize that Dachau is still the name of a town. I had no idea. I expected that people would have changed such a name.

Taking my transfer from the station to the bus, I wait in line beside a small park. It's spring and the cedars behind the fountain bud with new greenery. The rising sun warms the morning chill off a few small Bavarian homes, surprisingly not very different from the small town homes where I grew up in Minnesota: two story houses set apart from each other by a swath of lawn or a hedge. I watch an older couple outside weed one of their flower beds. Dachau, the town, looks like a nice place to grow up.

I watch the people taking this bus trip with me. A few are talking and even laughing as they get on, but most are silent. Wary. Like me. I know this trip will be good for me, but like other things that are good for me, I often resist them. I am especially apprehensive since I've been feeling particularly alone lately. Leapfrogging from city hostel to hostel without my companions, I eat Turkish-made gyros between outings to ancient cathedrals and obscure museums that the locals seldom visit.

From the bus, signs lead us to the site of the concentration camp. It's a block's walk through a residential area from which the walls of the camp are plainly visible. I expect to see these walls in black and white, dirty grey, as they are in the photographs, but the bright plaster and stone glow radiantly in the sun. Only the fences and barbed wire retain the dingy color I've expected.

Mostly college-age students or senior citizens in pairs or small groups, we walk slowly, cautiously, onto the grounds. Upon first glance, the camp looks like a walled-in football field. Only a few barracks remain, but the white foundations of some forty missing barracks squarely mark the distance on the enclosed field like yard lines. I later learn the barracks were torn down in the 1960s for safety concerns. To the left is the largest building, what looks like a command post, that now houses a museum. Straight ahead, a wooded area shimmers green in the mid-day sun.

Entering the main building, I take a brochure from the pile, one in French because I'm trying to learn the language. The entryway is dark, shut off from the brilliance outside. I begin to feel odd in this place, the building's bare wood floors, its authenticity. I imagine Nazi officials rolling their chairs across the spot where I stand. I am thinking about how the others around me feel, some of whom are certainly Jewish. I begin to walk through the museum. Because I'm not here with anyone, I can take my time. The cover of my brochure matches the title of the exhibition: "Dachau, le premier camp de concentration en Allemagne."

The photographs and text begin with the Nazi rise to power and progress chronologically. By the time we reach Krystal Nacht and begin to see photos of people burning synagogues and destroying shops, I stare deep into

the photographs, looking for clues in the faces, the hows and whys. The Warsaw ghetto, soldiers and starving children. I look closer. There are photos of medical experiments involving vats of ice water, high-pressure chambers, and malaria injections. These particular photographs show only the victims, gaunt and dazed. I feel that looking at them is voyeuristic, like gawking. I stop looking so closely.

Mid-tour, I attend a film showing actual footage from the war years. It's nothing I haven't seen before on public television, but being here in Dachau, seeing the exhibition, reading the rusting metal lettering over the entrance that translates into "freedom through work," I feel like I've never seen or heard this story before.

I identify with the Jews facing persecution, but as a Gentile of old German descent, I also feel implicated by the anti-Semitism of the Nazis. It is not until I leave the film and walk the remains of the exhibition, describing the systematic mass murder of the Jews and other "undesirables," that I feel a sense of being more intimately involved. People like me were killed alongside the Jews.

On one wall, approximately eight feet by sixteen, is an enlargement of the classification system the Nazis used for the camps. Beside two yellow triangles forming the Star of David is the word, "Juden," Jew. Below this are single triangles of other colors, denoting different groups: brown, "Gypsy;" blue, "immigrant;" purple, "Jehovah's Witness;" green, "criminal;" red, "political;" black, "asocial." The last symbol is one I recognize and have heard about: to the right of a pink triangle is the word "homosexual."

I am twenty one. I've known I was attracted to both men and women

since I was fourteen, but I am not "out" about those attractions. I identify with gay and bisexual people, but have only told a few close friends about my feelings. I had not wanted to think about any of this when I came here. I'd heard that the Nazis rounded up "sexual deviants" and sent them to the camps, even tried to cure them through experimentation, but I hadn't allowed that information into my conscious mind. I am still in the hypersensitive stage of coming out. I sometimes desire men, like Jason back home in the apartment with all the picture windows. I seldom talk about my feelings and avoid others who openly do. I am isolated from any sort of gay community, but standing here, I must once more recognize that tens of thousands of gay, lesbian and bisexual people were killed in the holocaust. I don't really want to think about it, though, so I move from the wall displaying the identification grid.

Outside, breathing easier in the fresh air, the sky still bright, I notice a loose sheet in my brochure indicating that a memorial service is to begin in half an hour. It's to be held in one of the commemorative chapels on the other end of the field. I decide to go, as I have nothing else to do here, no one to talk to.

To get to the chapel, I walk past one of the barracks. It's a reproduction, not an original. When first erected, the barracks housed 208 prisoners each. It says on the wall that with the expansion of the Third Reich, 1,600 prisoners lived in a single barrack at a time. The individual rooms are smaller than my last efficiency apartment. Everything but the foundation is wood, finished in a neutral tone. The four-level bunks that fill most of these rooms look like something out of a slave ship, each bunk hardly two feet from the one above

it. This is where the Jews, the queers, and the others, were housed. I see myself here, then, beside the emaciated forms in the pictures, amidst the striped black and grey uniforms of those crowded into bunks, their stripes receding like waves deep into the back of each room. Two older women viewing the barracks with me are crying together. I too have felt like crying but hold back.

Exiting the barracks, to the left, I come to the bunker, the building where prisoners were confined, disciplined, and tortured. I can only see through the grate in the front door. The door is locked. Inside, it looks like a barn with concrete stalls for horses, the long narrow hallway receding into a large, unlit room. The walls are the color of yellowed books, nicked and non-uniform.

Near the bunker, on the perimeter of the camp, is a housing development, what looks like a sub-division of townhomes. The yellow and blue suburban houses come right to the wall of the camp, one almost abutting the bunker. Looking up from where I stand, I can see someone's second-story deck, their sliding glass door. The renters must have a perfect view of the camp. Over any other vista, the deck would be a comfortable place to entertain family and friends. A green folded lawn chair leans in the corner.

Heading once more toward the chapel, I walk behind some other people. They are bearing right, a direction the brochure says leads to the crematorium, and I follow them. Set back into the woods, the building is nestled into the natural cover around it. A worn path leads there amidst long grasses and emerging crocuses. Birds twitter among the budding lilacs and the sun peeks gently through long tree branches. I am thankful that my brochure

is in French and I cannot understand all of the words: *abattu sur place, des fusilades en masse.*

The crematorium itself looks like a tool shed or an artist's studio, with white plaster and red brick structures on either side of the three oven chambers. The architecture is almost Spanish, lacking only stucco. The ovens look like kilns. The storage rooms beside them are empty, although I expect to see clay pots. The building appears white-washed, sanitized. I remember someone telling me that the reunited Germany has taken down signs commemorating the forced marches. What is scouring one building compared to that?

I move from the crematorium to the chapel. The open building seats about thirty people comfortably, although the solid concrete benches aren't all that comfortable. It is cool in here, shaded from the sun. A dozen people are seated already, waiting. I sit in back.

The memorial service is in English, Hebrew and German. There are readings and prayers, stories of survival and resistance, but we sing no songs. During the service, I notice something in the corner of the chapel, apart from the benches. It looks like a painting on an easel, only it's thick and triangular. Clusters of daisies and carnations lie at its base. After a moment, I realize that the triangle is made of etched pink granite. Although I cannot read the words from my seat, I quickly decide that the etching must commemorate the gay, lesbian and bisexual people who died in the camps.

Although not "out," I am comforted by the memorial's existence. In its presence, I feel a portion of the service is for the five million others who died in the holocaust, those who wore the black, the blue, the pink, the red

triangles, five million dead we often don't hear anything about.

The leader of the service intones the dedication, "To the millions who died in a time of madness and terror. May their memory endure. May their memory be a blessing and a sign of peace for all humanity. Let us say together: Amen."

Yet their memory, our memory, is current as well. Even in the short time that I've been in Europe, I've heard about and read many disturbing things: desecrated graves, beatings, weapons stockpiles, even bombings. Jews around the world regularly face neo-Nazi anti-Semitism; gypsies are still under attack throughout Europe; gay and bisexual people often risk their lives by coming out; and Arabs in Europe live in fear of night-marauding skinheads. Even today, in many countries, expressing one's political opinions is often the basis for imprisonment or execution. "May their memory endure." Their memory, our memory, lives now, surviving both silence and hate.

My brochure on Dachau never mentioned the pink granite memorial. I know those French words. They weren't there. I found the memorial on my own, stumbled across it by accident. Yet, the flowers beneath the stone tell me that I am not alone in finding it. Even here we find each other. We survive and remember.

After the service, I stand before the memorial to my people, the men and women brought here only fifty years earlier. I read its surface, touch each thin word, as I must pay tribute to those who have gone before. I try not to care who sees me. In a moment of silence, as the others file out the chapel, I am alone before the granite memorial. I recognize its place, my place, here.

After a long afternoon at Dachau, oddly enough, it is in an empty chapel I find I no longer feel so alone.

SECTION TWO

Witness

In this blue grey room, drinking tea,
I hear the sound of thrushes

filtering through the screen,
small voices in open Iowa prayer.

Indeed this morning I need
a benediction, reading the memoir

of a survivor of the camps.
Even with the cool breeze coming in

and children laughing outside,
my shoulders are unconsciously tight,

my breathing constricted and dry
as I read of Buchenwald, Flossenbürg.

Sometimes I forget to take a drink
of the peppermint tea I made

because to me unimaginable
truth reads fast like fiction.

The Austrian who narrates
his story is sent

to the bunker for some infraction.
(How is it that war camps,

like prisons, need a separate space
for discipline, for fear?)

From a cell, the Austrian watches
four SS guards drunk on Weissbeer,

mostly school age boys, really,
torment a man with a pink

triangle sewn across his stripes.
For entertainment, they suspend him,

hanging his hands from a wall hook
in the corridor between cells.

Gently stroking a goose feather
across his feet, the guards wait

until the man can't help but
laugh along with them, tears mingling

with the involuntary. The boys
conduct their own inebriated

experiments on the human body
with bowls of scalding and freezing

water, later a horsehair broom,
the screams of the man diminishing

only as his voice hoarsens.
Yet the laughter of the guards

only grows louder with each bottle
cast aside. At this point,

I set the book down, the leather
of my easy chair uncomfortable

beneath me. The sound
of the birds mixing with the laughter

of the neighbor boys outside
no longer feels so comforting.

The windows are fragile panes,
the door, only plywood

and the most effective defense I know,
the word, feels blunt in the face

of this scene. Even prayer
doesn't seem enough to save us.

Queer Ghetto

Headlights filter through these branches,
dancing patterns on the brownstones.
Low clouds grate themselves on sidewalk
in a late night hanging fog. And as always,
single pilots cruise me slowly in their Skylarks,
in their Preludes, circling lakeside,
curving shadows, so Gallant.

See the men here, simple workers,
smile like stone to you from doorways,
from the corner by your car
that's landing gently on this strip.
Curbed and bound, they hold up placards
with your name into the headlights
that seek to bathe them and undress me
as I'm merely walking home.

Land, you captains, and do enter,
then depart from us, ascending.
Leave us tenants, blue and hollow,
as you've left us times before,
but know we reel
in starlessness,
know we reel
and nothing more.

L'echange

1. Sitting on the crumbling headwall,
I watch manic breakers scatter waves
at the low river's mouth, casting a circle
far beneath my feet. Although a gathering
crowd braves the wind off the Atlantic,

I want Michel near, to retain me.
Yet, I am comforted by his sudden distance.
Even though we walked labyrinthine streets
to reach our own view, to witness
this receding sun, here now, with tourists

all around, it seems less the destination we'd sought.
I would approach him, reclaim him
from the rest, trace a smile on his brooding,
but his remote silence is a mirror, puzzling me out
even as I muse on his diminishing pull.

Has our weeklong coupling fallen weighty
mid-flight? Incongruencies emerged?
His face betrays nothing but thin,
artistic curls and dark eyes.
I don't know enough of him yet

to say if this is simply his way:
I'm still unsure why,
when he offered me a cigarette
last week at the *Galerie Cravache*,
he offered to show me the city as well.

Although I no longer smoke, nor need a guide,
 I did not wish to refuse those eyes anything.
 At night, I pay in cash for the privacy I lost
 somewhere in the port of Tangiers.
 By day, I walk tangled streets with him,

arm and arm, as is the custom here,
 shunning neighbors and his apartment.
 By late afternoon, we fall into our hotel:
 him, the French expatriate playing tourist,
 me, his young American abroad.

2. Late tonight on the beach,
 with the ocean dark and moonless,
 the lingering sky blends into endless water
 as I lean on the door of a parked van
 with Pink Floyd droning from its speakers.

Sand cakes the tires and similarly my shoes,
 although others stand barefoot.
 Michel's friends, more like a gang,
 have offered me drinks and cigarettes
 in excess of my need, but now leave

the war on my quieting reserve to Michel.
 Already warm with wildberry schnapps,
 I feel a slight calling. In the darkness,
 the ocean speaks over low guitars
 and I venture to the naked shoreline.

I want to wade in the water, shoes in hand
 but hesitate at the black edge, caught,
 unsure of the entirety lapping before me.
 Briefly, headlights dart overhead and away
 as an army transport races the frontage road,

then thankfully obscurity returns,
 the necessary shell of my unruléd aspirations.
 Michel joins me, lingering just behind,
 ringing arms around my shoulders,
 surrounding me warmly like a leather jacket.

"It's good that you came," he says.
 Shifting, he turns and steps into me,
 eyes down, innocently knowing.
 He kisses me then with gin and tonic lips,
 sweet and simple.

Instinctively, my arms go around his neck
 and I think I understand how a young girl
 can fall in love with the boy who waits
 at the corner for her, who waits patiently,
 an inward storm, for her to arrive.

3. In our refuge of a room,
 overlooking the station, we drink mint tea,
 feet up, and listen to the nighttime passings
 of visitors and vacationers, to the last call
 for the last train to Casa then on to Marrakesh.

The scent of the scalded mint and sugar
pervades our cheap double room as Michel
pages through a glossy art magazine on one
bed, slowly humming "Blue Monday" to himself.
I hardly begin my drink before I decide

to throw something at him, the socks balled up
beside me, just to fluster him and to bring him back.
Startled, blank faced for a second, he raises
eyebrows, and then, laughing, reciprocates
with a crushed napkin, following it up in person.

I relish this attention I've rather easily earned.
Reclining on the near bed, sockless but dressed,
I am willing prey to his approach. Yet, before me,
he stops and smiles white like the sheets, eyes glittering.
He seemingly has more subtle motives than revenge.

Perhaps it's the hour, or the little time we have
remaining, but whatever the reason, he motions me
to join him at the foot of the bed and I follow.
Enveloping me, as if in some unspoken sadness,
he holds me briefly, then begins to lean me back,

slowly, until I am almost entirely lying down.
Gently cradling my head,
he suspends me there,
weightless,
for a moment.

Above, the glass fixture scatters loose rings of light
over white square tile, and the station is silent
with departure. Despite Michel's desire
and sure hold, it is in this moment
I most distinctly feel that

I am falling.

SECTION THREE

"Two fires in-
formed me,

(each refuge fails
us; each danger
becomes a haven)

left charred marks
now around which I
try to grow."

Margaret Atwood

Loring Story

Beer doesn't seem an appropriate drink here, not amidst the elevated ceilings, painted Spanish walls, the wine-colored pattern curtains, and mismatched antique furniture. Hidden behind a pony-tail palm, kept alive in the northern surroundings by an exceptional heating bill and the revenues from the bar, I'm sunken into a sea green doily-covered parlor chair. If this cafe is class, it's certainly a *nouveau riche*, bohemian-style class. Yet they do serve beer here, microbrews and imports, and tonight I'm going to be having one, everything I have to do here and all.

Luckily, or perhaps not so luckily, Marcus isn't here and so I have my thoughts to myself for the moment. Right now I'm drinking blackberry tea with hibiscus, no caffeine. When I get into the mood-altering beverages I'll go straight for the alcohol. I need a false sense of calm, not jittering nerves. Marcus deserves better. A glance at my wrist tells me it's only seven minutes past when we'd agreed to meet. Outside, dark has long settled over the remains of the last snow, some of the grey slush from the streets transforming itself into pool-like salt stains beneath my boots. In the next room, on stage beside the bar, a jazz trio is reproducing a reserved "Summertime" as background music for conversation. I take a small sip of tea, rationing, in preparation for what could be a long night, this being our last cafe, the Loring.

My porcelain cup, the inside staining red, glows white in the soft incandescent light. The tea, with crushed hibiscus lingering at the lip, has cooled nicely in the minutes since the waitress brought it. I never used to drink much tea until Marcus got me started. He seems to have a thing for tea,

says it goes along with being a Buddhist. Although his meditation practice intrigues me, I picked up Marcus's tea habit purely for my own secular enjoyment.

As I set my cup on the table beside me, I notice the waitress serving mixed drinks to an older couple, a woman with cropped blonde hair, a balding man in with oversize leather jacket beside his suit coat. I can't hear what they are saying for all the distance between us, but I'm less interested in them than I am in the waitress. My age, she projects a poised but stormy efficiency. Wisps of lustrous brown hair escape her ponytail, framing her face like parentheses, the tips intermittently touching the edges of her smile. I try to notice without staring at her as she lingers before the various tables of her section, bronze coin earrings swaying, a short apron over her jeans that hugs her waist, and the off-white shirt revealing the outlines of her breasts. Sometimes people are just tremendously beautiful.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting," Marcus says, touching my shoulder as he passes behind me. "The six was slow tonight."

"I've haven't been here long. That's fine," I reply, looking up to him.

He circles and falls into the plush chair facing mine at an angle across the coffee table. Unzipping his waist-length jacket, he surveys the room as if he were in his own apartment. Still wet from practice and a shower, his black hair is unruly, and his eyelids seem low for this hour. His face, always a diplomat's or a Roman's, remains strong, deserving of laurels, but tonight it's tired just the same. Practice must have been difficult. Putting his feet on the ottoman, he sets his scarf and gloves on the table between us.

"It looks full tonight," he says, looking around for the waitress.

"Yeah, kind of. I think everyone's preparing for the gallery crawl."

"It must be something, all right," he says, stuffing his duffle beneath the chair.

We are turned outward, as if the conversation is not exclusively our own but is open to patrons at the cafe. Yet, the music, the bushy philodendrons, and the potted palm are our only guard. For that reason or perhaps another, a familiar silence settles over us, and we become lost in our drinks: I in my blackberries and he in the tea he is thinking of ordering from the now absent waitress.

"I think I liked it better when the sax player was here," he says, looking to the doorway where the music creeps in.

"Really," I say, considering. "I don't mind this at all."

"I don't mean I mind it. It's just the guy last week was so much better."

"To me, I guess, they're just different. The piano can carry so many melodies at once. If you'd seen who's playing, though, I'm sure you'd alter your assessment."

Pausing, he says, "Just a minute, I'll find the waitress," then is gone.

"The one with the pony-tail," I say after him as he passes into the other room.

He is like that sometimes.

Then again so am I, or at least I aspire to be. Impetuous, impulsive, whatever you want to call it.

I was trying to be impulsive when we met at our first cafe, the Blue Room. The place served performance art and poetry along with their espresso and Marcus performed there periodically with an informal dance group

because, even though people often smoked there, the stage was pretty large. I was there for the Wednesday night open mic, trying to be, if not impulsive, at least brave, reading my most twisted poems to date. One had Coca-Cola declaring itself the official soft drink of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and another was about a maniacal vegetarian chef trapped in a meat cutting class. I followed these with some of the more lyrical poems I wrote while overseas in Morocco. Less enthusiastically received—they weren't as obviously funny—the North African poems brought him to me after the reading.

Marcus had been to Morocco for a few weeks while he studied dance abroad. He knew the Casbah des Oudias in Rabat and had been to the Djemaa el Fna in Marrakesh where Hitchcock set "The Man Who Knew Too Much." At first I had thought Marcus was Moroccan himself. He looked almost Arab or Spanish, but he said he was originally from Costa Rica and had lived in Minneapolis since he was eight. He was excited to meet a fellow artist and traveler and flattered me with his interest in me and in my work. Because of his hesitant forwardness, I sensed his enthusiasm veiled more than just a casual interest in me, but nothing over the top. He offered to meet me at the same place the next evening, and later, we made the Blue Room a regular thing.

My intuition proved correct, and although I found his early openness attractive, I still had serious reservations. I had lately been more honest about my own attractions, would sprinkle some conversations with references to men or women I found attractive, but dating men was never my strong suit. After going out with a few guys I'd met, dating some for a few months at a time, I would sometimes find myself daydreaming about the *femme fatale*

receptionist at work or some woman I'd exchanged brief looks with on the bus. It was not that I found the men I dated unattractive. Hardly. I just found my head turned more frequently to the skirts and the long necks of different women than it turned to their male counterparts. I concluded I was picky about men. Marcus seemed undaunted by my concerns, though, banking on his own strengths, and within a month, we were dating.

"He's cute," Marcus says, sitting down with his own cup of tea and a smile I haven't seen on him for some time.

"Not my type, really," I say, returning a tight smile, "but I know you go for the well-dressed musicians with talent."

"Musicians, like dancers, are simply born beautiful," he says. "It's a requirement."

And it certainly is true in his case. An excellent dancer, Marcus is a beautiful man, the kind of man I would want to have father my children. He knows children well, can relate to them and play their games, is not threatened by them. He knows dance well, too, not just standard ballroom, but modern dance, the painful interpretive stuff that's either profound or pretentious depending on how it's done. With Marcus, it's improvisational theater, half dance, half acting. I've seen him dance in a blue bodysuit as background for a piece on the ocean and then dance the lead for a piece titled "Dreams of Being a Cheerleader." The end had four men from his group dancing behind him in matching pleated skirts, holding pom-poms they'd borrowed from a small community theater. The crowd loved it and it ran for a few weeks. Although usually he was quite restrained, during the show, he

was such a little queen, swishing his thin hips everywhere. Perhaps that is the price of success.

One night, after one of the shows, we retired to his apartment, as we often did back then. In his bedroom with brightly-colored batiks on the walls, we left curry stained plates and pop-filled wine glasses on the floor near his futon. Then, Marcus put on some song from the early eighties, Boy George or the Go Gos, because he still had the cassettes and knew it made me laugh, not having heard the songs for years. Standing at the foot of the bed, away from the plates, he danced for me, his shoulders swaying to the beat of "Karma Chameleon" then "Miss You Blind," whatever was on. He didn't care if the music was cheesy. In fact he preferred it. As he danced, he began to move slowly, affecting a slight shift, and his body dragged out the rhythm of the song, dancing quarter beats as half beats, and half beats as whole ones, rendering the frantic dance music much more sensual. I was an audience of one. The surety of his steps and the animal grace with which he held his torso recalled for me the beauty of dark bodysuited men and women I had seen performing *Equus* late at night during mid-terms for a crowd of sleep-deprived college students.

Marcus presented himself as the actors had, displaying themselves in animal form, strong-thighed and statuesque on metal stilts. I remembered the actors trembling side by side, letting the lead man stroke their manes and pet them gently, his hands hovering just above the fabric stretched over their full frames. The elaborate movement of the horses, actors of both genders, bodies of varying shapes and sizes, was a revelation to me. The actors' muscles, swelling and graceful, would imitate a loping gallop, and then one of the

bodysuited actors, a man, would break from the rest and begin imitating the languorous glide of a horse in full run. There, slightly raised behind the actor, would be the protagonist, seeming to ride this horse, convinced of its beauty, sure of the storm in the animal's eyes and the depths of emotion within, caressing the shoulders, the chest, of the actor on stage, the two furiously paired and racing through the low lights of the dimming theater.

What Marcus was doing before me was of the same nature. The performance was over shortly after it began. I soon rose to join him, my hand reaching for his own. Whether or not he was playing "We Got the Beat," he was the man who belonged in my arms at that particular moment, he was the man with whom I could share myself. In that moment, he'd blunted my caution, and I would follow him to this dangerous place. His expressive abilities ran deep, and he would take me into his circle, almost meditatively, and hold me there, swaying with him from side to side. Responding to my clumsy advances, he welcomed me, extending his sensual performance to include me. As the two of us kneeled onto the bed, everything else became logistics, sheets and light switches, buttons and blankets. Everything narrowed to the space of a futon and the surreal experience of holding a man in my arms, the calm strength of his grip, the lingering burn of his stubble against my cheek, the size of his lips on mine. Naturally enough, we were side by side, almost entwined, him leaning over me. Eventually the room was dark except for a few slow-burning candles on a low bookshelf and the light reflected off our bodies.

"I need to talk with you," I say, over the silence that has returned and

gathered strength during the musicians' set break.

He nods, absentmindedly rubbing his wrist as I cling to my tea.

"It's not really working, Marc."

"What isn't working?" he asks.

"The whole thing," I say, looking to his tired eyes, sure that he knows what is coming.

"Why do you say that?" he asks, reaching for his chamomile.

"Because it's true."

Although the beginning of the relationship had been exceptional, it had slowly devolved and not only on my account. There'd been the predictable things: he'd want to go dancing at the 90s, but I preferred staying home to sitting in a smoke-filled bar. There were the usual matters of who sleeps in which apartment and how often, of negotiating late evening hours and early morning wakeups, but we managed those issues well enough. Then came the thorny stuff, what we could hardly discuss rationally anymore because too much was at stake: the seven months we'd been together, our walks through the sculpture gardens, the times we would meditate together, our late nights in bed. Lately, things were not what they once were. He'd not only been going to the 90s without me, but stayed out later each weekend. Then there was the other matter.

"Is it her?" he asks.

"No," I say, wishing it were only that simple.

"But you've slept together, haven't you?"

"No, not at all." I say, surprised he would suspect us of that.

"Well, what have you done?"

"We kissed, that's all."

And that had been all, as simple and as complicated as a kiss can be. I could even tell him about it, but I hadn't because he did not seem to want to know. It wasn't Erin, not her, but more the way she had danced with me that night, what it recalled for me, hip to bone, a playful grinding, the way that Marcus might dance with me when we did go out, only with her it was more dangerous. It had something to do with the feel of a satin dress beneath my fingers and the give her hip beneath my hand as we twisted together. She was a friend of his, had a class on jazz dance with him. Short, with a small build and reddish, burgundy hair that reached her shoulders, she was particularly cute and animate. Erin's slight facial features and square, soft jaw, left her looking small but fierce, unpredictable. She knew I was Marcus's lover, but when she and I were together at dinner or someone's house there frequently emerged, despite what I take to be our best intentions, an unspoken tension between us, shortened glances, careful movements. Flirtatious to begin with, Erin was the type of woman who enjoyed flirting with gay men simply because they were gay, because she could do so with impunity.

Yet, although lovers, neither Marcus nor I was entirely gay. She was certainly safer coming on to him. He'd long ago concluded that his desire for men exceeded his desire for women, even though he surely found some women beautiful and was open to the possibility of dating a woman under exceptional circumstances. With me, that distinction was less clear. I knew I was not entirely straight, nor entirely gay. So far I had no definitive placement of myself in between, although I generally knew that my attractions

to women were stronger than to men.

From the start, this had been a sticking point, if not the sticking point, between Marcus and me. While I'd told him early on that I didn't know if I could be in a serious relationship with him based on my past experiences with men, he nonetheless persisted. I didn't want to hurt him and early on even suspended our meetings at the Blue Room because I wasn't sure if it was right to go against my intuitions or fair to place him in so tenuous a position, but he gave me space, called when he thought it wise, and claimed willingness to take the risk, saying we'd take everything as it came and not sweat the details. Yet that was exactly what we were now doing. Erin was a detail.

"Damn it, Chris, this is too much," he says, setting the cup down and looking off to the other room.

I just put my head down, considering everything again, going over and over our early negotiations, his futon, then Erin's semi-formal. She invited me because her on-again, off-again boyfriend was currently off and Marcus, her second choice, couldn't go because of a performance. Although I appeared pretty low on her list, I agreed to go. It was at the Embassy Suites downtown, and we danced pretty hard the first half of the night. As with Marcus, I had to work to keep up with her on the dance floor. Erin was hot that night. Her green satin dress shimmered beautifully in the light and made her look kind of reptilian, small and slinky. She moved like a reptile too, swaying, curving into the beat. The smooth satin of the dress was an unexpected pleasure for me, somehow amazing me in its flowing pliability. I delighted in the feel of her beneath the fabric.

After the dance, Erin checked into her suite upstairs for the party later and changed into a Cure t-shirt and blue jeans. There were a number of us in the suite, mixing rum and Cokes and quietly spinning someone's CDs long into the night. Erin put on a muted MTV in the background and began a game of Hearts at the table in the front room. Slowly, over the course of the night, most everyone disappeared to other rooms and the only other people left around us went to sleep. Erin and I claimed the long couch to watch early morning TV, *Cheers* reruns, while still digging through the bags of Cheetos and Rold Golds that had been abandoned earlier. She felt comfortable beside me, leaning on my shoulder at times. Although I was enjoying the feel of her reclining beside me, I tried not to follow it anywhere. It would have been too easy. Although distant lately and distancing still, Marcus was the man I trusted, the man I wanted to be with, whether that would be possible or not.

At one point Erin seemed to be falling asleep beside me on the couch, all quiet, and then she leaned over and kissed me, right on my lips. Nothing long but not just a peck either. Taking a moment to register what had just happened, I quickly realized that she remained there before me, her face immediately before mine. In that moment, I chose to return the kiss, leaning into her, our eyes frighteningly close. Short but effective, our second crush of lips, held briefly, meant something somehow. As we moved apart, she reached to gather her shoes and said the kiss was for being a great date. With that, she got up and went to bed, leaving me to the couch to sleep and to forget her kiss.

I'd been glad just to be near her, beside her. I blocked the usual desire I felt for her, in particular because Marcus was not there. Although we seemed

to desire each other, Marcus was our shared concern. She knew that I cared for him and that I also desired her, a dual conclusion I was fast approaching myself. It wasn't that the second canceled out the first or even competed with it. I liked Erin, but I hardly knew her. She was wild and wonderful, alive, but she wasn't necessarily my kind of wild and wonderful. If I had to be honest about Marcus, I had to be honest about her too. She might be my affair, but she was probably not my next relationship. As a result, what it all meant, to me, to her, to Marcus, was unclear.

I can't explain much of this to him here. Little would make sense and I wouldn't know quite what to say. But I have to say something since the jazz trio next door is executing a painfully slow "My Romance."

"It's not about you, and it's not about her," I venture weakly, looking to my boots. "It just happens this way, I guess."

"I guess," he repeats coldly, checking his watch. Linger on its face, he finally says, "You know, I better get the hell out of here if I'm going to make it back to my place tonight. The six won't come for another hour if I miss this one."

My thoughts race as I think of trying again, of telling him, of explaining it once more, but there's nothing I can do to make this easier for him or to make the guilt and doubt diminish within me.

"I'll walk you out there," I say, reaching for my coat.

"No, that's OK," he says. "I'll be all right. I think I'd rather just go by myself."

As he stands to gather his things, his jaw tightens. He seems

disoriented as he looks about him, something stirring haphazardly with him. I feel the weightless panic of a person who's made a choice, closed a door, and now must stand on the other side alone.

"I'll talk to you later, won't I?" I ask, all I can think of.

"Yeah, maybe later," he says, approaching me, reaching down and hugging me anyway. Awkwardly, I stand into this hug and feel his grip around me tighten for a moment, and then slack. Our eyes meet once before he turns, and then he makes his way to the door, his duffle in one hand, his shoulders held solidly back. He reaches for the door, strong and graceful as always, and in one full movement, he is gone.

I know that if I leave now I'll be right behind him for most of his walk, so I wait a bit, gathering my jacket, looking to my cup, then looking to his. Standing by my chair even though no one else in the room is standing, eventually, I fish in my pocket for a tip. It seems I'm not going to be needing a beer after all. It'd just depress me now. I simply slip on my winter coat and begin making my own path to the door, past the palm trees and the wall coverings, past couples captive to their own negotiations. I look back for a moment, simply to remember the scene, to recall where we were in our last time together. Although hardly any time has elapsed since I stood up, the waitress is already clearing our table, gathering her tip and the cups in a quick gesture and then wiping down the table with a long and easy "S" motion, removing whatever might have lingered there.

SECTION FOUR

Queen Christina

This morning making
fingertip traces on your back
you smile like Garbo lingering
with her Spanish ambassador
I bring you fruit warm bagels
clear the livingroom for you
write your name in cursive
skywrite on your back
circling, circling in arcs
dancing and
time goes
slowly
if at all

You sit up
lean forward
wrapping your arms
around your knees
leaving only your back
and hips to my hands
I gently press my thumbs
low near your spine and
breathe onto your exposed neck
you make noises like a winter bird

We're bound for Spain
and in our absence the Swedish court
twitters and consumes itself

Our snowbound nights
in this heat of July
are over for now

we're onto something new

Kuppernicus Cafe

Matchbox from a St. Paul cafe I've never seen
but you thought it might ease my displacement from you
I'm dreaming of a skyline
over banks of broken clouds
wet halogen-lit streets an almond latte
the stub from some Eastern European film
and your short black skirt the one with parchment lace
that you once curled up for me under the table

It's my dream of another life outside this cell
Even though I'm finally willing to listen
to these cottonwoods shimmering in the breeze
to the damp yellowing corn of the floodplain
to the drag of pickups on Main street
I hear you underneath it all and over it
over this life of the plains and the mind
that plays tricks on me
stirs up dust against gravity
causes uncalculated drifting

Young astronomers drawn to Italy
must have pined the imbalance of their knowledge—
the heart of the solar system on fire
but human orbits more wildly elliptical
than round
In a dream kissing you once more
everywhere you taste like butter toffee
or perhaps mocha a halo of smoke in your hair

and your arms encircle me on some terrace overlooking
a floodlit lot of water-beaded cars
"All of this could be ours," you say
before releasing me
You lit match of
forgetfulness
be my center

Hokyoji Means "Moon" In Japanese

Hokyoji is a Buddhist retreat center on the Minnesota/Iowa border founded by Katagiri Roshi, a Japanese priest who brought formal Zen practice to Minneapolis in the 1960s.

1. Day

In the shade near the box elders, I feel myself plain,
 rendered slack through loss of the city,
 no worn brake noise at the stoplight
 or early morning arguing from the couple upstairs.
 Instead, six a. m. begins here with a wake up bell
 and the answering sound of tent zippers:
 metropolitan Buddhists awake

in the Hokyoji woods. By now, though, morning meditation
 is over and I've already returned stocking-footed
 to my tent to nap as I often do after sitting. Enlightenment
 makes me sleepy. Silence is its own drug.

As I waddle on my knees
 over cool sleeping bag nylon, I can neither find
 my pillowcase, nor my teacher's book
 on Zen I had thought was in here.
 At home, despite the noise, at least I know

where everything is. Outside the window netting,
 sparrows dart from nearby blue spruce to pine
 and two women, standing on a tent platform,
 merge yoga routines to the smell of warming
 cinnamon and raisin oatmeal.

White clouds rib a newborn sky,
 and the stupa on the ridge,
 where my teacher is now, glows green and gold

in diffuse sunlight. My search inside yields little,
 so I relent to the slight comfort of a bare pillow.
 Outside, children are shouting and laughing
 once more. Quiet time is over and their yelping
 rustles freely through the valley. The cover is off
 the wading pool, although the water is likely cold.

As I close my eyes and the children's voices
 grow louder in my head, sleepily, I make out one
 calling his brother a penis for dousing him
 with a frisbeeful of pool water.

Although I might have dreamed of bodhisattvas
 and Buddha nature, of a finger pointing to the moon,
 instead I dream of charred grilled cheese sandwiches,
 old apartments, and the persistent ache within my knees.

2. Night

Low clouds skim overhead
 in a thin wax paper layer,
 but through a small break in the covering,

dark stars puncture an otherwise veiled sky.
The moon is about to surmount
one of Hokyoji's many ridges
and the clouds light up from behind
with expectation: the master is coming.

Watching the entrance unfold, I lie on my back,
hands loose on my chest as they would not be at home.
Wind tousles the leaves of the elder maples,
and fireflies dot the edge of the forest like
far off street lights.

The moon is everywhere
even though it has yet to appear.
I find the night suddenly beautiful,
yet hold my breath
in anticipation,

arrested,
waiting somehow
for the imminent, surely more beautiful,
following moment to arrive.

3. Dawn

Wind curls about the valley, wrapping me
in its weight. On the steps of the zendo,
I sit, leaning into the morning-like ascent

of the moon. Refracted sunlight—
the moon's strength not even its own—
spills everywhere in the night, glowing brightly
through the clouds on this dark day,
even rendering luminous the leaves, these steps—
everything—the long grass surrounding the foothills.

My breath deepens as the breeze
exhales with me and as opening clouds
hush the illuminated fearless night.
The moon makes visible patterns
of grain in the wood railing,
flowing smooth under my eyes,

my fingers following the waves of time,
stories in themselves of wisdom, purity,
and the events that cut and shaped
these buildings. In this moment,
I am craftsman, beneficiary,

critic, and witness. The moon
reflects off dark shingles, a kitchen roof,
the empty priest's quarters. A whippoorwill
calls out in the blackness to another of its kind
and I feel as if I could answer back.

4. Morning

Teacher, Roshi,
 I am weak, but willing.
 I know not where to apply my strength
 and so come to you asking. You were always
 so much a part of Saturdays, your students chattering on.
 Janelle and Leah gossiping over red zinger—
 who'd done what, and who was where now.
 Your name was never far.

Nonin and Natalie would speak often
 and in such detail, that I could see you curbside
 in dark robes, waiting an hour for your ride
 to the airport, not moving. I could see you
 in the kitchen tending a white orchid
 that others had long given up on.
 I could even see you ill, one floor up
 from the zendo, buoyed by the meditation
 downstairs. The cushions were filled with you, not kapok.

Now, here on your ridge, the moon lingering,
 the sun hesitating to arrive
 and the long Hokyōji bells silent,
 I find black-eyed Susans laid at an angle
 across white quartz stones,
 the immaculate marble steps of your shrine.
 The mekugyo is in place for morning intonation
 and the sky dresses for ceremony.

Today, we wash your gravestone, Roshi,
and chant the Dai Hi Shin Dharani to you
in our weak Japanese. In remembrance,
throughout this day, I will eat slowly, breathe well,
and focus on my work in silence, but tomorrow,
no longer visitor to your home,
I return to the city
and fear not any late rides to the airport,
an orchid of my own to tend to,
nor my own slow dying,
but rather that I will not see the orchids
that await me there as the opportunities they are
amidst the push and bustle of my home.

Shikantaza

Shikantaza is Dogen Zenji's twelfth century description of meditation practice, literally "just sitting." It can also refer to a state of deep awareness.

sit here
just here
you have means
to transform

sit now
right now
as the mockingbird
outdoors

joins the cars passing
leaves rustling
furnace rumbling now
as the sun
slips through panes
into thin
parquet lines

as the bird
clacks the glass
like a clock
marking time
counting thoughts
constant ghosts
of tomorrow
or before

you're this longing
black-winged soul
free already
wanting more

SECTION FIVE

"I says, 'Well, what do we do?' I'll never forget this—
Tommy says, 'Well, let's do what they're doing.'
I said, 'Well, they're just facing the wall,' so he says,
"Well then, let's face the wall.' . . . That's how we
started with Buddhism."

Mickey Martin on Buddhist monk
Issan "Tommy" Dorsey (1933-1990)

"Half a world of love
has opened halfway."

Thich Nhat Hanh

Retreat

"I'm not trying to be difficult," Jules says, walking beside the overgrowth. "I almost get it and nearly agree with what you're saying, but then I lose it and it doesn't make sense anymore."

"Buddhism doesn't always make sense," I say, keeping to the gravel road.

"But it has to make sense or you wouldn't do it," she says. "We wouldn't be here."

I raise my eyebrows.

We walk separately on the worn road of the retreat land, Jules nearer the raspberry bushes and pearly everlastings. Her blue madras shorts and bright top clash with the greenery and her short sandy hair, cut to her chin, makes her look boyish, except for her serious face. I'm in a t-shirt and black jeans, drab almost.

"I don't understand how people justify meditation in a world where it's such a privilege, where people go homeless and women in the shelters can't get by. Spending a weekend or a few of them just sitting seems irresponsible," she says.

"Looking at it that way, how can we justify anything?" I ask, the walk no longer so enjoyable. "Is taking a vacation irresponsible? Is going to church irresponsible?"

"No, I don't think so," she says. "Vacation is vacation. Church is church if you're into that, but meditating on weekends and at retreats just seems indulgent to me. You might as well be out drumming with Robert

Bly."

Ignoring her comment, I let Jules think what she will. She'll do it, whether I put up a fight or not. I haven't yet found a response to her concerns that suits her. Of course, if I wanted to sit more often, to go on another Zen retreat, whatever, she would likely support me, but that wouldn't mean she'd understand what I was doing or why. It's hard for me to blame her, though. Zen Buddhism is tough stuff, seemingly apolitical, and Jules sees the emergency everywhere, working long hours at the women's center, publishing their newsletter, and volunteering some evenings at the shelter. Jules takes a lot on the chin, but she has been fading lately—migraines and her insomnia.

When Jules gets home some nights, she has difficulty sleeping, her thoughts racing ahead of her or nightmares circling in the dark. At those times, I just hold her, sometimes waking her, and try to calm her breathing and her fears. I tell her everything will be all right and gather her close to me, gently massaging pressure points on the back of her neck. I tell her stories of beautiful places, safe places, beaches with comfortable sunsets, soft clearings in a peaceful wood, whatever comes to me. Usually that helps and she falls asleep in my arms. Maybe that's why I think that Jules knows more about meditation, about quieting down, than she lets on.

"Are you going to continue your activism?" she asks.

"I can attend retreats and still be an activist."

"But there are only so many hours in a day," she says in her pragmatic voice. "The longer you spend meditating, the less time you have for organizing."

"Zen is organizing of a sort."

"A pretty sedate one, you have to admit," she says from her side of the road.

Having met in political circles through mutual friends, Jules and I have activism in common. A woman who's dated women before, Jules accepts and understands my work with the gay group on campus. She understands how I can find both men and women attractive but prefer to date only the latter. She understands what it is like to be more comfortable in gay locales than in straight ones. She understands because she shares many of my dispositions. To her, I am the first man she's dated who supports her feminist activism. No one else has understood why she would organize rallies and volunteer so much time to different groups. I may not understand everything, but I know that her activism is her life's work. It would be her church, if she had one. Despite all our similarities, though, it seems that we are of differing denominations as of late.

Even before Marcus, I'd been an infrequent and informal meditator, mostly with silent or guided visualization. Then, Marcus gave me the address of the local Zen center and I've been sitting regularly there ever since, almost the full two years that Jules and I have been dating. Jules doesn't generally mind. She leaves me to my morning meditation and even agreed to attend this retreat with me. Yet, something about my Zen practice unnerves her.

As we walk, I find myself wanting to forget these matters. Enthusiastic wildflowers push up beneath the ash trees, and cardinals dot the spruce like holly berries. On a curve in the road, a small brown creek runs along the almost colorless gravel road. Nearby hills bloom forest green, then blend a

softer shade in the valleys, sloping into each other like sand dunes, rendering the cloudless sky even brighter. This is certainly the break I need from my graduate studies and organizing. Although I know that she needs one too, I'm less sure if this is the break Jules would have chosen from the women's center.

"So, does this mean you are going to start going on long retreats and visiting obscure teachers in Japan?" she asks, hands in pockets.

"I don't think so," I say. "Even if I wanted to, I couldn't anytime soon. No money."

"Well then, I guess I'm glad we're poor," she says, smiling to me.

The cottonwoods overlooking the creek sway in the breeze.

"Don't worry, Jules, I'm not leaving anytime soon. This is just some inner work I want to do."

"I know," she responds. "That's what I'm worried about. That's what Gloria Steinem said before she published Revolution from Within and pissed everyone off."

Walking further up the drive, approaching a cluster of oaks, we slow down. Although I would like to walk some more, Reiho's already made the day's schedule and only a few minutes remain before lunch. Buddhists like schedules, and Zen retreats like this one are modeled, however loosely, on monastic life in Japan. I suggest to Jules that we return and, pausing briefly before a group of buttercups, we turn to rejoin the others.

"Is Zen something you would want to do for a living?" she asks, as we approach the road from the other direction.

"I don't think you make any money at it," I say.

"Don't you think it gets boring, all the sitting?" she continues.

"Not so much," I answer, a little dishonestly.

"I don't think I could ever do that."

"You'd get used to it."

"They couldn't pay me," she says, dismissing the idea with a free hand.

"Don't worry. They won't."

Standing beside me for the blessing, Jules's hands fidget, her interlaced fingers flexing back and forth. My head is bowed—that's how I can see Jules's fingers—as Reiho begins the meal prayer. An American woman in dark robes, Reiho stands before the twenty of us gathered by the kitchen porch. A motley group from ages four to fifty, we stand near the ceramic bowls of food arranged buffet style. Reiho's hands are arched in prayer:

"This food is for our parents, teachers, leaders, and homeland
and for all beings.

Thus, we eat this food with everyone.

We eat to end all evil, to practice good,
to save all sentient beings,
and to accomplish the Buddha way."

The group bows into the last words, even Jules.

With greying blonde hair and a resemblance to Julie Andrews, Reiho seems to be a cross between Maria of "The Sound of Music" and Mary Poppins. Her rapport with kids and parents alike is exceptional. One moment she can preside over two forty-minute mediation sessions and the next be on her knees with the kids looking for earthworms near the pool. Upon

finishing her prayer, Reiho steps back to allow the parents to serve their children first. There are a lot of children this year, both little ones waddling around with their sealed plastic cups and older kids who'd just as soon be playing football or video games than spending a weekend out here camping. I have made an annual event of the retreat two years running and asked Jules to join me this year, hoping that she might pick up an interest in Zen or at least a better understanding of it. Despite her initial reservations, she accepted.

Like Reiho, Jules and I wait for the parents and the kids to eat first, but we do not wait too far back. I am particularly hungry as the fruit we had this morning, the fresh strawberries and yogurt, while tasty, was not filling. I am looking forward to the tabouli and falafel that today's cooks have whipped up, along with the sandwiches and orange wedges for the kids. Keith, the one with the guitar at the campfire last night, joins the line just behind us and I introduce him to Jules. A lanky, curly-haired guy with electric blue frame glasses too large for his face and a big grin, Keith asks after our walk and suggests a few directions for our next one.

"There are some nice spots down by the creek," he says, "but they aren't well cleared. Soen knows where they are."

"Who's Soen?" I ask.

"The bald one, just returned from a monastery in Japan," Keith answers. "He's making his transition out here. I guess it takes a while to readjust to America, so he's keeping the grounds this season."

Jules looks to me, eyebrows raised, as he says this.

Upon loading our plates and finding the cups with our names taped to the side, the three of us find a picnic table with only one person at it and join her. Dianna is what I imagine a mainstreamed hippie to look like, only in her early forties, she is too young to have been a real hippie. In a faded peach cotton blouse and jeans, Dianna quells her dark hair with an ornate silver and gold barrette. I remember asking her about the barrette last year and she told me she made it, that she made jewelry for a living, and hawked her work from show to show to help pay the bills. I thought her occupation rather brave until she countered by saying I was a writer and that I'd get used to it.

Introducing Dianna and Jules, I listen closely to how Jules answers when asked if she is a Buddhist.

"Nope, just along for the ride," she says.

Dianna asks what Jules does at the university, and Jules describes her PR work for the women's center. Jules also mentions her organizing and her hours at the women's shelter.

"Not easy work, I'm sure," Dianna says. "I give some money now and again to those organizations, but I know it isn't much."

The discussion ranges from the women in the shelter to the youth work Keith has done in rural Minnesota to the excellent vegetarian cooking that Dianna helped with. She made the falafels.

"Christopher, you know, I'm going through lay ordination in the fall," Dianna says between forkfuls of tabouli.

"Is that's when you take the vow to save all sentient beings?" Jules asks.

Dianna nods yes, chewing her food.

"In what sense do you save them? Buddhists don't go door to door

recruiting people, do they?" Jules asks.

"Not that I know of," Keith says, "but I'm sure that somewhere in the world they do."

"In Japan, monks beg for food door to door," I say.

"That's right. See, I knew that happened somewhere," he says.

Dianna answers, "The Buddhist idea of saving beings is more about trying to end suffering through compassion. For example, saving the lives of animals by not eating them—or in my case, not eating them as often—or seeking to be peaceful within yourself and encouraging others to do the same."

"Then how do you save *all* beings?" Jules asks.

"You can't, but the idea is to make a serious effort," Dianna says. "The Dalai Lama says if you can help others you should, but if you cannot, at least you should not harm them."

"Remembering that some of our actions can adversely affect people 20,000 miles away," I say.

"Or our inactions," Jules says.

"Or our inactions, yes," Dianna says.

After lunch, Jules and I retreat to our tent near the long row of other brightly-colored tents in the valley. Ours is a blue oval bubble just this side of the tall grass. She and I lie back and watch infrequent clouds pass overhead against a solid backdrop of blue through the mesh netting of the tent ceiling. It is quiet outside as Reiho has the kids in the zendo cutting out construction paper footprints.

"I could almost do this," Jules says, lying beside me, shaded and cool. "I could almost be here and be fine with it, but it just seems too easy."

"Too easy?" I ask, adjusting the pillow behind me.

"Too simple to just opt out of the world," she says. "There's a lot of shit that needs to be done and not enough people are doing it. I can't see how sitting around is going to help other people."

"Whether or not there's a lot to be done," I say, "there's still a place for mediation. You don't want to run haphazardly from one fire to the next and then the next. You'll burn yourself out or screw something up and then what use are you?"

"At least you tried," she says. "People are dying out there."

"But you can't save them all," I say, tiring. "And you can't save anyone if you trash yourself."

She was silent for a moment, and in that space, I could hear the warbling of a robin nearby.

"Well, you're right about the burning out part," she says, "but I still don't agree with everything else. I probably shouldn't be so mean and slam you, though. I'm just trying to understand these ideas on my own terms, and I get caught up."

I pause, seeing if she will continue in this vein.

"Here, let me touch your head," she says, pulling me to her, drawing me to her shoulder. "I don't mean to give you such a hard time."

Stroking my head, she says, "I do plan to go with you to the sitting tonight, just to see what you do. I don't know if I'll last forty minutes, but I'll be there anyway. I wouldn't be there if I didn't feel . . . well, you know, if I

didn't feel OK about trying it."

She presses me to her, as she does often when I am upset or under deadline. Sometimes, if I am particularly agitated when she holds me, I shiver beside her, as if I want to cry but somehow cannot. At those times, she just continues to hold me, without a word. Tonight, she whispers, "I don't have to understand everything. I don't. I don't have to get it at all. I guess, I'm just surrounded by it here and it doesn't quite work for me. It's OK, though. It's not my thing."

That night, after dinner, Keith rings the brass-handled bell to signal the group meeting. Standing on the steps of the zendo, the long rectangular wood building across from the priest's quarters, Keith sounds it in the precise rhythm of a Buddhist roll down, its tone diminishing in frequency, then nothing. Although Jules would just as soon read more and I wouldn't mind getting some work done on a paper that's due next week, the meeting precedes evening meditation. Approaching the zendo, I show Jules where to take her shoes off and model for her how to bow before entering the meditation hall.

Once inside, it's obvious that the children have been working hard. Their small colored footprints are taped to the hardwood floor in a large square, making a path to individual mats. At the base of each wall are black fabric mats in parallel lines, a round black cushion atop each one. In the center of the room, an altar displays a quiet, meditative clay Buddha and a flowering lavender hyacinth in a glass vase. Near the vase, a thick white candle burns beside a wooden box filled with incense and ashes. The color footprints guide the children and the rest of us to our seats. Jules and I bear

left, and take two cushions over by Keith. The kids straggle in behind us, some quickly finding a parent's lap to lie across, others sitting near their friends on adjacent cushions. Reiho enters the zendo, bowing in the doorway, and takes her seat to the left of the altar, bowing once more to everybody. The kids bow in return with wide grins.

"Thank you for coming," Reiho begins. "I always like to have everyone together at least once so the adults can sign up for kitchen duty and the kids can hear about the other fun stuff we're doing this weekend." Securing kitchen volunteers, she also asks for adults to help the kids rehearse a play for tomorrow.

"Who knows why we're here this weekend?" she asks the kids.

"Because we come every year," says the boy near her.

"That's true, we do come every year," she says. "Are there also other reasons why we're here?"

One girl in a faded rainbow shirt says, "It's a retreat."

"Yes, very good, and what kind of retreat is it?" she asks.

"A Zen retreat," the boy says, venturing a second answer.

"Exactly. And who knows what Zen is? Does anyone know what the word Zen means?" she asks.

Even I had to think about the answer for a moment, as accustomed as I am to the word being used as a religious designation.

"Meditation, isn't it?" the rainbow girl says.

"Yes, that's right," Reiho says. She explains to the kids how sitting in meditation is about relaxing in the present moment and following your breath: "Many of you know how to do that pretty well. Kids tend to be experts

at it, but a lot of us adults are out of practice. That's why we're here."

Reiho then asks everyone, the kids included, to begin the meditation session together. She says that after the first minute anyone who wants to leave is free to go and join Dianna and the others outside who've agreed to watch the kids. Reiho simply asks the kids to leave quietly, following the footsteps taped to the floor, and to try to keep quiet once outside.

"I will ring the bell three times to start the period and then won't ring it again for another forty minutes. OK, is everyone ready?"

The children nod and everyone begins to turn in their seats to face a wall. Once the group finally settles in, Reiho strikes the small bell and then all is silent except its reverberations, our breathing, and the birds outside.

People shift or move periodically on their cushions as I begin to focus on my breathing. I count my breaths from one to ten, but before I can reach ten, my awareness shifts to Jules. It seems to me that it's one thing for her to be along for the ride, quite another for her to participate in Zen practice. Even though I would love her to enjoy this, love her to share my practice, I know that she could be hating this the whole time I'm sitting beside her.

As I try to settle in, I hear the first kid stand up from his place, the one right next to me, as he prepares to leave. His weight registers on the floor nearby, then alternately away from his place as he makes his way to the door. Once outside, his pace picks up and I can hear him say hi to Dianna. Following his example, slowly one by one or in pairs, the children begin a quiet exodus from the zendo. Then, the sounds of the kids come from outside once more, as they look for earthworms again or play catch or color at the tables. Some of the older children remain for either all or part of the forty

minutes, testing their fortitude.

Like them, Jules stays. Although by now my breathing has become a bit easier and some relaxation has settled upon me, I am still thinking of her and of the things she has said. I know her convictions are firmly held. Her family went periods without much money and sometimes got by on little food. I know she made her way through school as a scholarship child. She has even told me about the coercive relationship she was once in. I have not experienced most of these things, not to the degree that she has, and so feel as if I cannot address all of her pragmatic, political, and personal questions about Zen. From my own experience, though, I know that when I am overwhelmed or cornered, sometimes a short break, breathing deeply to take care of myself, is enough to pull me through.

Like Jules, at times I too have trouble sleeping, with calming racing thoughts of my own, thoughts of deadlines or of other's expectations, but as I do with her, I try to calm and slow myself down. That is my practice, not hers, but here she is beside me, trying to experience this thing called Zen or what Reiho just called "forty minutes of quiet breathing." Spiralling in my thoughts, here and now, I remain squarely on my cushion until even I know I need to pause and return to my breath, paying attention only to the breath, not to the sound of the children outside or to Jules sitting beside me. Somehow, then, it becomes easier for me, my attention finally focusing on my breath, feeling my diaphragm expanding, and noting the open range of my thoughts. One of them is: whatever she experiences, it is her experience. This one's mine.

Reiho sounds the final bell and the group slowly begins to move. Turning around and stretching, we gradually stand and bow once together, and then file quietly out of the zendo. The sunset colors of the sky are beautiful outdoors and the kids are happy, as they can be loud once more. Jules walks ahead of me onto the zendo porch where our shoes are, and, finding hers, she sits down to put them on. As I reach for mine, she senses me behind her and turns, giving me a half-smile.

She says, "That didn't seem like forty minutes."

"It goes fast sometimes," I say.

"I could have sat longer," she says.

"There is tomorrow evening, the same time."

"Well," she says, "I don't know that I liked it that much."

"Whatever you think," I say, looking up to the warm sky.

"Well, yeah, whatever I think," she says, finishing up her laces.